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The Roman Road: Our Relationship With Authority

August 18, 2024

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Romans 13:1-7 (ESV)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Well, back in 1968, something happened to me that I really had no control over, and that is, I was born. I was born into a family in the state of Iowa in the United States. The family that I was born into is known as the Butler family, and my mother and father happened to be Dave and Nancy Butler. I'm telling you this because they were my first authority in life—they were my parents.

Under the guidance of Scripture, I'm called to obey my parents. At that time in my life, my parents were in charge of me. God placed me in their family, and they had a certain amount of

authority in my life—indeed, a radical amount of authority. I grew up under their care, and they loved me and all their children. I'm thankful to God for where He placed me.

Since I was born into a small community, that community had a police force. I can tell you that I was also under the authority of the police force in that community, as well as the city council and town leadership. I was placed in this town, within the context of a state—the state of Iowa. I was under the governing authorities and still am. It's the state I still live in. I'm still under the governing authority of the state of Iowa. We have a governor, a House, and a Senate that make the laws of the land here. Then there are law enforcement officials and judges who regulate the law and provide justice in our land.

This state is in the midst of the United States, this great country that is ruled by a federal government. So, there's the authority of the federal government over me. I'm sharing these things with you today because I want to ask you: What authorities are you under?

I happen to work part-time in a church where I pastor and preach as well. That church is organized in such a way that there is another pastor who is ahead of me, and then a council that is ahead of that pastor. In the leadership of the church is the congregation. It's a congregationally led church, and they say that the leadership of the congregation is Jesus Christ Himself—He is the true head pastor of the church. So, I'm under those authorities as well. Everywhere I go, I have different authorities that I'm under.

Also, God has put me in positions of authority. This is part of what God does—He disseminates authority out to us as individuals here on His earth. I'm asking you to think about these things today: Whose authority are you under, and what authority has God entrusted to you?

For some time, I was a father of young children. When they were in our home, the Bible says they were to obey their mother and father. But now that they've grown and left the home, the Bible doesn't say they need to continue to obey my wife and me. Our children are free to do what they want under God's authority. Now, the Scripture does ask them to honor us, just as it asks my wife and me to honor our parents. But we no longer have to obey in those arenas of life.

As we think about this, we turn towards Romans 13 and Paul's instruction in this passage of his letter. He begins addressing our relationship with governing authorities. He says this: *Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

The overarching idea here, the main theme in this first statement Paul makes regarding authorities in the world, is this: All authority begins and stems from God Himself. This is true all through Scripture. We see, at the very beginning, God is the one voting, God is the one deciding, God is the one creating. And then He entrusts authority to individuals as He sees fit.

Right from the start, in Genesis, we see that He gave the first man dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air. He gave him a realm to have authority in, and then He gave him a partner to share in this authority. But this all comes from God. Paul just wrote earlier in Romans chapter 11: *From Him and through Him and to Him are all things.*

So, He is not just the source of all authority — He's the source of everything.

When Jesus was on the earth, He gave us what we now know as the Great Commission. His last instruction to His followers about our work in the world, being the salt and light of the earth, was that they should go into all the earth and preach the good news of Jesus, teaching people to obey all that He had commanded them, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Where did He derive the authority to commission them to do this? From God Himself, as the Trinity, of course — the mystery of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. And what did Jesus say about His authority? He said this: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* Then He disseminated some of His power, His authority, to them to fulfill this commission.

You know, the Scripture repeats this theme time and time again. In the book of Job, we read that God Himself makes the nations rise and fall. He builds up some and abandons others. The psalmist asks this: *Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'* And then the psalmist answers simply by saying: *Our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases,* because all authority is His.

He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no one higher than Him. The Scripture very clearly says of Jesus that He humbled Himself, took on the nature of a servant, was found in human likeness, and became obedient — obedient to God. Now, there are the Three-in-One, the three separate beings, yet they are all the same God. Jesus went to the cross in the midst of this Trinity. He paid the penalty for human sin. And when He did this, in His obedience, in their sacrifice together — here's what the Scripture says: *God has exalted Him to the highest place and given Him the name that is above every name, the name of Jesus. At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.* All authority comes from Him.

And so, here's what Paul continues to say: God establishes, in His authority, the human authorities that exist. Then he says: *Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.* In a sense, here's what he's saying: God establishes governing authorities for the restraining and punishing of evil so that human life can flourish. We should understand this to be true. These authorities are there for punishing bad behavior, right? It's a terror not to good behavior, but to bad.

This is in the context of government fulfilling that which God established it to do. Of course, in a broken and fallen world, this doesn't always happen the way it should. But this is still true. If you're in a land where certain laws exist and you violate those laws, the government may come after you and punish you. Ideally, those laws align with God's laws for morality and the flourishing of human life, and those punishments of evil are appropriate. People who don't think there's evil, selfishness, or the need for restraining evil in the world really haven't studied history. I mean, *the human heart is deceitful above all things. Who can know it?* Our selfish bent, the tendency for human beings to corrupt control, live for themselves, and break God's laws—it's rampant. And because of this fallen world, we need some sort of restraining entity. That is civil government, according to God's design.

An example of this would be when I was younger. I happened to park in a cemetery across from a friend's house that I was visiting. I left his home later in the evening one time, and I pulled out of that cemetery, and a police car started following me. Here's civil authority following me in my car. They followed me for quite some time. I was a little nervous, thinking, *Are my lights not working? Is that a danger? Am I speeding?* I wasn't speeding. I couldn't figure it out. *What laws was I breaking? How was I endangering or dishonoring other people?* Finally, the police car turned its lights on and pulled me over. I found out why they were following me: it seemed they had had some vandalism in that cemetery for a number of nights in a row, and they wanted to know if it was me who was marring other people's property and damaging it. So, they asked if they could search my trunk for any tools. I let them because I was not guilty. There was no fear of terror for me from their punishment because I didn't do anything wrong. And that's how civil government is supposed to work. Paul, under the inspiration of God's Spirit here, is saying we do well to cooperate with the external authorities God has put in our lives as much as possible.

He continues saying it this way: *One must be in subjection not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this, you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing—creating an environment where human life can flourish.* So, he says: *Pay all that is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.* What Paul is describing here is just good Christian living.

This is appropriate for us—not to get entangled with the authorities that God has put us under so that we can live out our higher calling. Paying taxes, honoring people, paying our bills, being responsible—this is part of honoring God. We're made in His image; He's a God of order, and this is part of living. But I want to suggest to you, friends, that this passage should not be isolated from the context of the whole Scripture. If taken by itself, we might misrepresent what God is inspiring here. This is a good way to live, but it's not the whole purpose of life. The purpose of our lives, the goal of our lives, is much bigger than this. The prophet Isaiah tells us in Isaiah 43:7 that we were created by God ultimately to bring Him glory—to honor who He is, to reflect Him. All of creation is just an overflow of the majesty,

greatness, power, and might of God: the stars, the moon, the galaxies, and the planets. Even this earth was designed by God to sustain life in the way it does. And then you and I are placed here with all the other living creatures as those unique individuals who bear the *imago Dei*—the image of God. We reflect what He is like. And in reflecting what He is like, God wants to use that to draw all things to Himself, so that people can get caught up in Him and know the fullness of joy, peace, and hope that overflows in those of us who draw nearer to Him.

So, the goal isn't ultimately good citizenship. God is instructing us here, in the midst of a broken and fallen world, how to best behave with rulers and authorities who are there to restrain evil, so that we might fully live as His ambassadors, representing Him in this world. Second Corinthians 5:20 says, it's as if we are His ambassadors from a different land—a different and eternal kingdom—here on the kingdoms of this earth. And it's as though God is making His appeal through us. So, we don't want to get tangled up in civilian affairs.

Then comes the question: what happens when the governing authorities and God's authority are in conflict or they disagree? We have to answer this question in the context of this text, as it fits in the larger picture of Scripture. When we read the larger picture of Scripture, we see that, since God is the highest authority and His ways are perfect and right, when His ways come into conflict—or, better said, when a governing authority's ways come into conflict with His ways—you and I should always choose to go with God. Always.

When the Pharisees came to try and trick Jesus, they asked Him about paying taxes and whether it was lawful to pay taxes to their governing authority, Caesar, or not. Jesus said, "Show me the coin for the tax." They brought Him a denarius, and He said, "Whose likeness is on the coin?" They said, "Well, that's Caesar's." Then Jesus said to them, "You are right. And so I tell you, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's."

Here's where you and I need constant discernment. If we're in this tension—if we're in a place where the governing authorities in our lives are asking us to do something, believe something, or behave in a certain way that goes against our conscience before God—we need God's help on how to live this out. And you see hundreds of examples of this in the Scripture.

In Daniel chapter three, we read about three Hebrew men who were in Egypt, and their king was King Nebuchadnezzar. King Nebuchadnezzar had gotten to the point where he was calling people to worship him. He built a tower of himself for them to bow down to. Of course, we should offer our worship to no one but God. We should offer our ultimate trust to no one but God. We should offer the first fruits of our lives to no one but God. This is very clear in the Ten Commandments: You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not bow down to any graven image.

Well, they were being mandated to bow down, and 300,000 people bowed down to this idol. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said no. They were obeying God. But King Nebuchadnezzar was infuriated. He told his servants to heat up a furnace seven times hotter than it had ever been heated and to throw these three individuals into the furnace. And they did so. Even the individuals who threw them in, the Scripture says, died from the heat. But when the king looked in that furnace, he saw four men: Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and someone else. And he knew it was God.

Now, God doesn't always protect those who give their allegiance to Him. Sometimes He allows them to suffer and be beaten and martyred and hurt. But our obedience to God is very clearly lifted up above our obedience to governing authorities when the two are in conflict—all through Scripture. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are examples. Daniel is an example. Rahab is an example. Esther is an example. The disciples are examples. Even Jesus Himself is an example of being obedient to the higher authority of God when push comes to shove.

Friend, I hope you hear this: God wants you and me to be respectful of the authorities that He has put us under as much as possible, and only be forced into civil disobedience when God's laws require that from us.

Those who have ears, let them hear.

Father, thank You for this time together. We ask that You continue to minister to us and instruct us in Your ways by the power of Your Spirit. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.